

Talk of the Town: Low flow on the Verde River needs citizen action

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Even before I got out of the truck, I could see trouble. The Verde River flow looked like a trickle.

I was at Perkinsville Bridge in late June, crossing the Verde River 22 miles east of Chino Valley on Perkinsville Rd., working on the Sierra Club Water Sentinels monthly measurement of the river flow. The Water Sentinels is a citizen-science effort that monitors the water quality and quantity on Arizona rivers. We have been measuring the Verde since 2007.

Our instruments recorded a record low flow of 8.9 cubic feet per second (cfs), about one-third of the average flow in 1940. This is consistent with our observations of declining flow since 2007, confirming our concern that, due to excessive groundwater pumping and regional drought, the upper Verde River is in trouble.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) is extremely concerned about the low flow measurement because our mission is to protect the Verde River and to achieve a sustainable water future.

Mile zero on the Verde is at Sullivan Dam near Paulden. Perennial flow begins at Verde Springs at mile two, near the confluence of Granite Creek. The U.S. Geological Survey calculates that the water released by Verde Springs is groundwater: 80-86% from the Big Chino Valley aquifers, 14% from the Little Chino Aquifer, and 0-6% from aquifers north of the river.

All our regional groundwater aquifers are connected to the river. Basic principles of hydrologic science tell us that groundwater pumping in the Big and Little Chino aquifers will eventually reduce the flow from Verde Springs by the amount pumped.

This is happening now — unmitigated groundwater pumping has already reduced the flow of the upper Verde River.

Verde Springs is the only significant water source for the first 25 miles of the river above Perkinsville Bridge. Anything that reduces the flow of Verde Springs by the measured 8.9 cfs will cause a dry river at Perkinsville Bridge.

Even one hour without water makes a very bad day if you are one of the three fish, two birds, or two snakes protected by the Endangered Species Act, or one of the other 478 vertebrate species that depend on the finest surviving riparian habitat in Arizona.

Low flows affect people too, especially if you like to swim, or fish, or hunt, or hike, or camp, or kayak, or photograph, or bird along the river, or if the river is your ancestral home. A robust and healthy Verde River supports over 700 jobs and \$100 million in economic activity in the Verde Valley.

The Verde River is a green artery pulsing through the heart of Arizona, a jewel of the Southwest. We cannot risk drying the upper Verde.

CWAG understands that to protect the river, we need citizen action. Try to reduce your personal water use. When your hand is on the faucet, your choices affect this river, our wildlife, and our children's future quality of life.

Because protecting the Verde River is also a political problem, citizens need to demand government action to reduce groundwater pumping. Let's start with this election: Vote for candidates who will work to protect the Verde. CWAG candidate forum videos are posted at cwagaz.org.

CWAG will host a Zoom webinar with Erin Young, Water Resources Manager for the City of Flagstaff, on Saturday, Sept. 12. Details at cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly is president of CWAG and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.

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